

Olympic figure skater Stefania Bertone finds purpose after competitive career

By Megan Fee

It's 10:46 a.m., and Stefania Bertone is a little over halfway through her morning's six hours of coaching at Fox Valley Ice Arena in Chicago. She's correcting her student's double-flip double-toe-loop combination jump and her fingers are frozen. As young skaters practice their programs for the upcoming holiday ice show, she's singing along to Frank Sinatra's rendition of "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

And she will be.

Home for Bertone is Milan, Italy, where she began figure skating at the age 4 -- and the country she represented at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. When she returns, she'll be joined by her husband and their 5-month-old son, Sebastian.

Bertone competed in the disciplines of singles and ice dance until the age of 19, when she partnered with Italian skater Ondrej Hotarek to compete in the pairs discipline. In their five years of partnership, among other accolades, Bertone and Hotarek were 2013 European bronze medalists, 2013 Skate Canada International champions and three-time Italian national champions.

Their partnership came to an abrupt and painful end in 2014 after the team placed 11th at the Olympics in Sochi, Russia. Hotarek told Bertone he wanted to be done skating, but soon after partnered with a different skater; devastating news Bertone first caught wind of from a newspaper after returning home from a month-long trip to America.

"Life as I knew it was over. I wasn't an athlete anymore, and I felt like it wasn't my time to be done. It was kind of a choice that was made for me," Bertone said. "I was in a very troubled state for a year or so."

Bertone said the support of her family and husband Rockne Brubaker, an American pairs skater whom she met at a competition in Bulgaria in 2006 and married in 2015, helped her eventually pick up the pieces.

"Because I wasn't planning on being done, I had never really thought about what life would look like afterwards," Bertone said. "It felt like somebody had turned off the lights for a second, and I was left in the dark there for a bit."

Sarah Arnold, manager of athlete development at U.S. Figure Skating in Colorado Springs, Colorado, has a unique perspective on this life transition.

“There is a timestamp of when an athlete is done. They can’t make money off of doing shows and being called in for interviews forever,” Arnold said. “There’s a shelf life, and I think that’s to be said about all sports.”

Arnold said she believes there needs to be more fundamental ways for high-level skaters to reach out to a network once they realize their skating career may be ending.

“In every interview I’ve ever taken, I’ve been able to highlight the strengths in time management, organizational skills, leadership, being able to work in the collaborative space, commitment, resilience, discipline,” Arnold said, explaining how skills and characteristics acquired from years as a competitive figure skater can transfer into other professional careers.

Arnold said life after skating may also give some skaters a sense of freedom.

“You’ve always said yes in your training, and you’ve never missed a practice, or training session or PT. You’ve always listened to your coaches if you want to be your best,” Arnold said. “Sometimes, in the real world, it’s OK to say no.”

Berton said yes to many things in her competitive career, but always thought she would say no to being a coach. Years later, teaching turned out to be one of her greatest passions.

After permanently relocating to America, she started spending time at the rink to help Brubaker with administrative work. She soon began teaching children in basic classes to fill her time, and eventually started to coach high-level pairs teams with her husband.

“Having the opportunity to start back from learn-to-skate and work my way up was actually what gave me the strength and the purpose to find joy again in the sport,” Berton said.

Coaching for Berton is often a family affair. During her morning lessons, she is joined not only by her husband, but also by his brother, Collin Brubaker, an American ice dancer and coach. At one point, Berton’s husband skates over to tell her his student has a twin sister, causing Berton to widen her eyes. She explained a dream she recently

had in which she gave birth to twins, to which she said with a laugh, “Three is more than enough.”

Among Berton’s students is 22-year-old pairs skater Edo Caputo. Caputo, like Berton, is from Milan, and met her when he was 11 at the Forum of Assago. The two reunited in October 2016 at a Junior Grand Prix competition where Berton, then a coach, recognized Caputo’s talent and suggested he and his partner spend a few weeks in Chicago training with her and Brubaker.

“I told Stefy, ‘I really trust you and Rockne, so whatever you think is good for me, I’m going to follow that track,’” Caputo said. He has since trained in Chicago for two extended periods and plans to officially move to the area in 2020. Caputo said he likes the method and skating atmosphere Berton and Brubaker have created at Fox Valley Ice Arena.

“First of all, she knows what she’s talking about,” Caputo said of Berton as a coach. He described her as encouraging, positive and “always nice, always always always,” and said that even if she has a bad day, she never lets it affect her job.

Caputo dislocated his shoulder in December of 2018 -- a devastating injury that left him off the ice for three months. In Berton’s positive nature, she told Caputo, “For me, this is the perfect opportunity to focus on the goals of your life.”

“She believes in me more than I do,” Caputo said. “I don’t think it’s about the country. It’s the soul. We’re connected. That’s why we’re successful on the ice.” He said he has looked up to Berton since he was young.

“Life gave her a chance to do something else, and she decided to follow that,” Caputo said. “Now, of course, she built a new life as amazing as the other one.”

Dave Lease, figure skating enthusiast and founder of the blog, “The Skating Lesson,” is well-known for his commentary in the community and has seen many skaters share similar experiences.

“You often hear them talk about how they realized that this was their job. It went from a childhood activity, to a hobby, to something they were good at, and then it becomes what they make money off of, and I think that’s a shift as well,” Lease said.

Lease said figure skating does not have an “exit program,” and that skaters can often be isolated from people their own age -- elements that intensify the already difficult transition to a life without skating.

“Skating is an intense love. I think it’s almost an addiction in some ways,” Lease said. “It’s a complete lifestyle. You can’t do it halfway and be successful.”

Though Berton may have felt that her competitive career was cut short, she has certainly found fulfillment both on and off the ice since.

“When it comes to motherhood, I would say this is one of the biggest joys of my life,” Berton said.

Though Berton may not have Sebastian by her side as she coaches, her ‘baby fever’ most definitely is. As she’s teaching a lesson, Berton spots a mother tipping her baby upside-down on the other side of the rink. She shouts across the ice mid-sentence to get the attention of her husband, who is coaching a young girl sporting a pink honey helmet whom he has nicknamed ‘Char-latte.’ “Look at that baby,” she yells with a huge grin. “It makes me think of mine!”

She attributes her strength as a mother to two things: her own mother and her years of experience performing under pressure.

“That definitely gave me an extra layer of self-confidence that I was going to make it work,” she said.

Berton said, above all, training in an elite sport has taught her to be OK when things are not OK, to believe in the big picture even if you are failing, and to always be grateful.

“Thanks to the fact that I got to practice perseverance for so many years, and got to practice falling down and getting back up for so many years, I can apply it literally to anything,” Berton said. “Anything and everything.”